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# Jewish Athletes in the Soviet Union: Challenges and Coping Strategies, 1952-1991.

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## Résumé

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 signaled the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, marking the end of an era in the history of communism in general and of global sports in particular. Sports were deeply embedded in Soviet culture, as a vehicle for advancing communist ideology. This study examines the role of Jews in Soviet sports, highlighting their significant contribution to its development. While the role of sports as a tool for enhancing social integration and emancipation among Jewish athletes in the West is well-documented, research on the Eastern Bloc remains limited.

According to the integration model, the unique characteristics of sports seemingly provided an opportunity for Jewish athletes in the Soviet Union to transcend ethnic boundaries, often with state encouragement and support. Yet this theoretical framework tends to overlook the significant challenges that Jewish athletes faced in the Soviet Union, and the heavy price that they paid. Competitive sports provided outstanding Jewish athletes with an unprecedented opportunity for social mobility and economic advancement. Yet the privileges that were associated with athletic excellence, in a society where latent anti-Semitism was pervasive, came at a cost: concealment their Jewish identity, difficulties to obtain international travel documents, restrictions their interactions with diaspora relatives and local Jewish communities, and expunging of their names from official sporting records and encyclopedias. Athletic excellence emerged as a key mechanism for confronting discrimination. An additional strategy involved cultivating a distinctive hybrid Soviet-Jewish identity – characterized by dynamism and adaptability.

This study draws on archival materials, personal interviews with athletes and coaches active during the Soviet era, periodical press from the Soviet period, and secondary literature. The analysis extends beyond sports to broader issues related to Soviet Jewry, specifically the formation of a hybrid Soviet-Jewish identity and the role of athletics within a socialist society.

**Mots-Clés:** Jewish identity, Sports, Integration model, Totalitarian regime, Privileges, Covert professionalism, Cultural heroes

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